

Building the Group

Chapter One

FOCUS

- Why form a watershed partnership?
- What makes a group successful?
- What are the obstacles to success?
- The People Resource:
 - Getting people to participate
- Forming an education committee
- Keeping the community in the loop

“We’re smarter together than we are by ourselves.”

~ Dennis Phillippi ~

Why form a watershed partnership?

- Members have identified a need or problem that they cannot address alone;
- Members individually lack adequate funding, skills, jurisdiction, et cetera, and by pooling resources can tackle the problem more effectively;
- A project has been identified that will benefit several groups or individuals;
- There is an opportunity to enhance natural resource management by drawing expertise and information from a wide range of individuals who live in and know the resource base and the local community;
- Partnership in a diverse group enables the development of creative solutions;
- Plans are more acceptable to the community and easier to maintain in the long term when many interests are involved.

Note: *Your group may think of itself as a **team, alliance, partnership, or watershed group**. The name is up to you. We will use “group” most of the time, simply because it’s short.*

What makes a group successful?

- **Broad representation:** all interests in the watershed are represented.
- **Local knowledge:** a wide range of people who live and work in the watershed and know how things function on the local level.
- **Effective communication:** communication is the primary tool used to resolve conflict and reach agreement. Conflict is reduced because everyone understands the issues and each other’s needs and concerns.

- **Common vision:** a shared community vision builds long-term support. With the public fully involved in planning and decision making, personal responsibility and commitment are increased.
- **Collaborative decision making:** decisions usually are made by consensus and everyone's needs are heard. By working to address all concerns, groups often develop creative solutions that are widely accepted.
- **Pooled resources:** management is improved by meshing the resources of several agencies and organizations.

What are the common obstacles to success?

- **History of unresolved conflict** among key members and an unwillingness to work at resolving the conflict.
- **Lack of clear purpose.**
- **Problems are not clearly defined** or are not felt to be critical.
- **Unrealistic goals or time frames.**
- **Key interests or decision makers are not included** or refuse to participate.
- **Partnership is not equitable:** some interests have disproportionate amounts of power, or not all partners stand to benefit, or members are not receiving credit for their contributions.
- **Lack of commitment:** financial and time requirements outweigh potential benefits, or some members are not comfortable with the level of commitment required.
- **Lack of follow-through** with action plans.
- **Basic values conflict** with no room for negotiation.

The people resource

Having everyone at the table

Failure to involve important interest groups or segments of the population is a common source of problems in watershed groups. Stakeholders who don't participate—or, worse, have not been invited—can undermine the group's efforts.

Full and balanced representation of all interests in the watershed promotes trust. This means that all interests are represented, but no single interest dominates the group. Working through the conflicting interests of different stakeholders makes the group stronger.

Bringing everyone to the table and keeping them there can be the greatest challenge facing a fledgling group. It can be tough to pull together a group with disparate interests, especially when the issue in the watershed is not visibly critical or is poorly understood. The personal time and effort invested in this stage of partnership building pays great dividends later on, however. Planning and implementation become easier because the group is well integrated, and all the resources of the community can be harnessed to meet the group's goals. ***It cannot be stressed too often that the best way to bring people into your project is to sit down with them and talk, face-to-face, about what the group hopes to accomplish.***

Leadership should emerge from within the group. Leadership roles should be filled by people from the local community. It is rarely appropriate for an agency employee to have a prominent leadership role in the group once the partnership is fully developed.

Use a facilitator

It may be helpful to consider using a trained facilitator for meetings. A good facilitator can bring out the best in a group, help meetings stay on track, channel conflict into useful energy, assist in developing effective ways to work together, and generally ease the process of partnership formation and decision making. Facilitators are available through consulting firms. Trained facilitators are also available from several federal and state agencies.

When inviting stakeholders to join the partnership, ask:

- Who could be affected by the group's decisions?
- Who could provide technical assistance, develop communication pathways, act as liaison to local political bodies?
- Who stands to benefit if the problems in the watershed are addressed, or suffer if problems are not addressed?

During the course of the project, ask:

- Should new groups or individuals be brought into the partnership?
- Are there enough interests represented to make good decisions that the community will support?
- Are the best people included to fill roles that have been identified?

Encourage participation:

- Appeal to people's sense of stewardship.
- Show how the problems in the watershed affect people.
- Stress that participation is voluntary.
- Let prospective members know what will be expected of them and how much time they will be expected to commit.

Find ways to recognize the group and its members publicly, so the community knows who is representing them:

- Encourage peer networking; have members personally recruit others.
- Conduct site visits and tours to generate interest.
- Use all available media to give the project a presence in the community.
- Establish a clear sense of direction, so people know what to expect.

Prevent burnout:

- Start with small projects that will provide early successes.
- Document and celebrate progress.
- Use rewards and incentives for continued participation.
- Do hands-on projects to give members a sense of ownership.
- Maintain a stable structure, with accountability to members.
- Identify specific benefits to landowners and participants.
- Keep track of accomplishments. Make sure the community knows about them.
- Develop personal relationships in the partnership so you may avoid conflicts and obstacles.
- Provide food, and have some fun!

Outreach, outreach, then outreach again!

Form an education committee

Establish an education committee. The focus of the committee should be to raise awareness among land users about soil and water resource problems and their control, and to build local support for an active watershed education program.

Identify education priorities. Priorities established by the education committee should reflect the resource concerns enumerated in the group's watershed management plan. It is vital that the education committee stay in close communication with the other committees within the group.

Identify the target audience. Determine who should receive the education that can help the watershed group accomplish its goals. Typical audiences would include agricultural and nonagricultural landowners, local politicians, county officials, elementary and secondary students, urban land developers, et cetera.

Characterize each audience. Key characteristics of an audience to consider include its values, motivations, natural resource interests, attitude toward the watershed project, information gathering habits, and work habits.

Establish measurable objectives. Objectives probably will vary among audiences, but if measurable, will allow the education committee to evaluate progress.

Design effective education activities. Design specific activities to achieve objectives, such as tours, exhibits, videos, direct-mail campaigns, workshops, placing curriculum material with teachers, etc. Check the appendix for additional resources and ideas.

Determine constraints to success. Knowing the limitations or barriers that prevent a program from being successful in the beginning can help prevent setbacks or unexpected failures.

Implement the education plan and evaluate progress. Periodically evaluating progress allows the education committee to adjust or redefine priorities and objectives.

Keep the community in the loop

Develop a publicity plan during, or right after, your initial public meetings. Determine the audience, the message, how the message will be delivered, who will do the work, when it will be done, and how you will evaluate the effectiveness of your publicity plan.

Suggested activities:

- **Posters:** For store windows, libraries, grain elevators, farm suppliers, grocery stores, post offices, etc.
- **Newspapers:** Write a feature article or series of articles for local newspapers. Find out who the feature editor is and develop a relationship with him or her. Use photographs of meetings and watershed events.
- **Television & radio:** Local stations have community interest shows and may announce local events. Ask to have someone from the watershed group interviewed. If there is a college in the community, video and other services may be available.
- **Exhibits:** Set up displays in libraries, SWCD offices, co-ops, county fairs, and anyplace that seems appropriate to publicize your accomplishments. Have handouts available.

- **Newsletters:** Report watershed activities in local newsletters that reach your target audience. Share success stories in Conservation Partnership newsletters such as Nonpoint Notes, Topsoil, Partnership Today, and in others such as Farm Bureau, Extension Service, Hoosier Chapter Soil & Water Conservation Society, Farm Service Agency, RC&D, utility companies, and organizations involved in your project.
- **Presentations:** Contact local leaders and ask to be on the agenda of civic group meetings, including Rotary, Jaycees, Optimists, Lions, as well as the County Commissioner's and Plan Commission meetings. Also contact interest groups such as Corn Growers, Soybean Growers, Cattlemen, Farm Bureau, Forestry and Woodlot Owners, Pork Producers, Young Farmers, FFA, Conservation Clubs, 4-H Boards, Extension Boards, SWCD Boards, etc.
- **Direct Mail:** Mail minutes, reports, critical issues, et cetera to *everyone* who attended or was specifically invited to attend watershed project meetings and public meetings. Mail letters reporting accomplishments to all principle stakeholders and interest groups. Investigate obtaining a bulk mailing license (there are annual fees) or partnering with a licensed organization to reduce costs. The post office has a free manual explaining the requirements and procedures for bulk mail.
- **Signs:** Use signs to advertise watershed activities. Place signs at project sites and on major roads to alert drivers that they are entering or leaving the watershed.
- **Personal contacts:** There is no substitute for one-on-one contact, in person or by phone, to explain your group's goals and plans, answer questions, and ask for support and participation.

Outreach is crucial at the beginning of the watershed planning effort, during the planning process, and after the plan is completed. If you are to have an effective watershed plan, you must constantly communicate with others what you're working to achieve.

How can outreach help ensure the success of your goals? Outreach and education can aid in developing an understanding of the value of our water resources, educating people on what's threatening the resources, and encouraging protective action. Outreach is key to building an awareness of the process and issues, educating stakeholders concerning necessary actions, and motivating individuals to implement those actions.

Outreach is so important that it cannot be fully addressed in this guide. The best booklet regarding outreach approaches is published by The Council of State Governments and is called *Getting in Step: A Guide to Effective Outreach in Your Watershed*. The publication effectively addresses how best to define your goals, identify your audience, create, package and distribute your message, and evaluate your plan.

To order a copy, contact:

Books on Demand

1-800-521-3042

or go to:

www.statesnews.org/gettinginstep.htm